## The Graz T – A tactile Ground Guidance System for Visually Impaired People

The City of Graz can display a great project. In order to help blind and visually impaired people walk safely on sidewalks and public squares, tactile ground guidance systems are now being developed all over the world. Although at the beginning the aim was to cover the entire public space with a guidance system, after the initial trials it was decided to simply mitigate sources of danger such as pedestrian crossings and large open spaces, as well as avoid obstacles and indicate prominent landmarks. The Graz T was therefore created in the late 1990s as a further development of a Swedish guidance system, in cooperation with the visually impaired people of Graz. Grooved and knobbed tiles were used which can be easily felt and distinguished with a mobility cane. The visually impaired people can use existing elements such as house walls, sidewalk edges, etc. in combination with the tactile devices.

Grooved tiles orthogonally aligned to the ideal walking line and the crosswalk were installed at pedestrian crossings in the shape of a T. A 70–80 cm wide band was installed in the direction of the walking line up to existing tactile elements such as house walls. The chosen width should make it impossible to move outside of the tactile area unnoticed. The crossbar has a width of 70–80 cm and a length of 280 cm. It lies centered on the intercepting line of tiles, forming a type of security zone before the crosswalk, and is an area of recognition after having crossed the street. The distance between the crossbar and

the edge of the street is about 30 cm, although for heavily travelled streets a larger distance is often chosen for safety.

An additional advantage of the Graz T is the resolution of an old conflict of interests between people in wheelchairs – who often want a zero percent drop at sidewalk departure points – and people with a vision impairment – who ideally need a 5 cm high sidewalk edge for orientation. Before the "invention" of the Graz T, a height of 3 cm was often recommended as a compromise. Following consultation with local representatives of visually impaired people, a zero percent drop across a width of 100 cm was built next to each Graz T, and in this way the mobility of both disability groups has been decidedly improved (Stadt Graz 2012).

Creative thinking can be concentrated, stimulated and multiplied, and this is something we have been seeing for several years now in Austria's second largest city. Since the turn of the millennium Graz has gradually managed to shake off the label of a 'City for old-age pensioners', and the conservative atmosphere of a boring provincial center is being replaced with a mental upgrade for the 21st century.

[...] The most significant result of the Cultural Capital year has been that this city without a Mozart, without breath-taking gothic architecture, or alternatively major tourist attractions, has emerged from the shadow of Vienna, changed its image and self-assuredly stepped out onto the international stage. (original text translated from Slovak into English)

Patrik 2012



Susanna Ahvonen, born in Helsinki (FIN), manager of Marimekko Concept Store Graz

www.marimekkograz.at

How long have you been living in Graz? I first came to Graz in 1984 to study as a "numerus clausus refugee", and remained in the city for 2 semesters. After that I was admitted to study architecture in Finland, and went back there. 4 years later I returned to Graz, and I have been living here permanently since 1988.

You come from the field of architecture/design, work yourself as an architect, and now manage the Marimekko Store in Graz. Can you give us some more details about your work? The Marimekko Store is different from conventional stores in that our work is very consultation-intensive. This means that day to day business does not consist mainly of walk-in customers, but of customers who come out of their way specifically for furnishing consulting, also from outside of Graz. This is actually my primary activity: to filter through these mostly vaguely formulated customer needs and desires, and transform them into interior design. This process is often similar to "motivation training". I attempt to extract the people from their reserved, cautious, conservative and sometimes also spiritless approach to design, and to convey to them the joy of living.

How were your first years in Graz? What was the social climate like there? Did you feel supported as a foreigner, or were there problems?

Coming to Graz from Americanized Finland at the end of the 1980s was for me like coming to a real Eastern bloc country: shops closed at lunch time and on Saturday afternoons, four-party telephone lines, parking tickets one could only buy at the tobacconist, and which one had to fill out by crossing boxes, etc. – the list is endless. As a foreigner I needed a residence permit and work permit, and had to apply for them every year in the "Paulustorgasse" (Paulustor Street). For me it was completely incomprehensible why one would place officials in this single agency – where it was guaranteed that only non-German speakers would go – who spoke no English at all, let alone any other foreign language. The year before I had worked in Sweden, and there it was a matter of course that for example at the government tax office there were counters where one could be advised in the most common immigrant languages.

I was also astonished when I found out that in Graz if you spoke very loudly in "foreign German", and addressed people with "du" (informal you), they would understand you. This would have been unthinkable in Finland. I personally didn't have any problems, because I spoke sufficiently good German and never needed support in that way. There weren't any problems, and the social climate in the architectural circles was at that time certainly more advanced and emancipated than in "normal" life.

Do you have any "favorite" projects which you have realized during your work here in Graz?

Yes, absolutely: the interior decorating of the "Haus am Ruckerlberg", the daycare center for dementia patients of the "Diakonie Graz". Thanks to the trust and engagement of the management, it was possible to implement many things here, and transform a not so optimal initial situation into a really positive environment through different interventions. This interests and excites me as a topic: how one han-

dles social organizations such as kindergartens, schools, care facilities, nursing homes, etc. In my opinion, good design in these places has something to do with respect and human dignity.

## What is your personal approach to design? Can you give us some keywords please?

On the one hand I'm influenced by my origins: the real classic Scandinavian "designer furniture" and daily objects. In Finland we are raised with them: everyone knows Aalto, Tapiovaara, Frank, etc., and also owns pieces by them which they have either inherited, bought second hand, or purchased after saving for a long time. Design, especially the classics, plays an important role in Finland. There is a historical reason for this: when Finland became an independent nation, the new state intentionally forced the formation of a national identity and consciousness through the use of architecture and design, as well as music. This influence is still present today – design has become a natural part of everyday life.

The word "marimekko" can be translated as "design", and I find that our slogan "Marimekko makes your everyday life happier" brings this idea to the forefront. It's about your daily routine, life and joy, and certainly not about status or luxury.

The pride and joy of my first student apartment was a 3 legged stool from Aalto (a house warming gift from my parents). I have taken this stool with me during every move, including to Austria. In this sense design for me means something like "home".

## How active do you find Graz in relation to design? How would you evaluate the city?

Graz or its inhabitants? The city itself, represented by the CIS as it were, is very active! There is a really wonderful, wide-ranging and untiring contribution there. I hope one day it will also bear fruit, in that "design" will also be perceived by the population.

However there is no established culture for this yet, this has to first be developed. Maybe the next generation, the graduates of the different design branches of the Universities of Applied Sciences. However,

interest lies elsewhere at the moment, in music or literature. The majority of the population only connects the term "design" with the word "expensive".

What is the atmosphere generally like here in the field of creative industries? Is there also a spirit of optimism at the grass roots level, among the designers?

I can't comment on this.

Cultural scene and creative industries: how do you see this relationship?

Graz is such a small city that the cultural and creative scenes inevitably mix. But this is in my view the real advantage of a city of this size.

Do you notice that Graz is a UNESCO City of Design? Yes, of course! Every day when I open the door of my store: there is a big sticker saying "Graz UNESCO City of Design".

Do people notice that Graz is a UNESCO City of Design, and is it visible in public spaces?

No, neither one is true. Since for me it is so self-evident, I'm always astonished that most of our customers – who are already design oriented – really don't have the slightest idea about this. In public spaces: no. The few alphabet letters, benches and flower boxes are very nice, but this has to spread out over the entire city on a very different scale in order to be perceived as a statement.

Does this title bring you something? Do you notice it in your own activity?

No, unfortunately not.

Would you like to remind me of something which I didn't mention? No.

## Graz, Austria – UNESCO City of Design

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